

# CATHOLIC COURIER

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Christ in film

## Culture colors face of Jesus

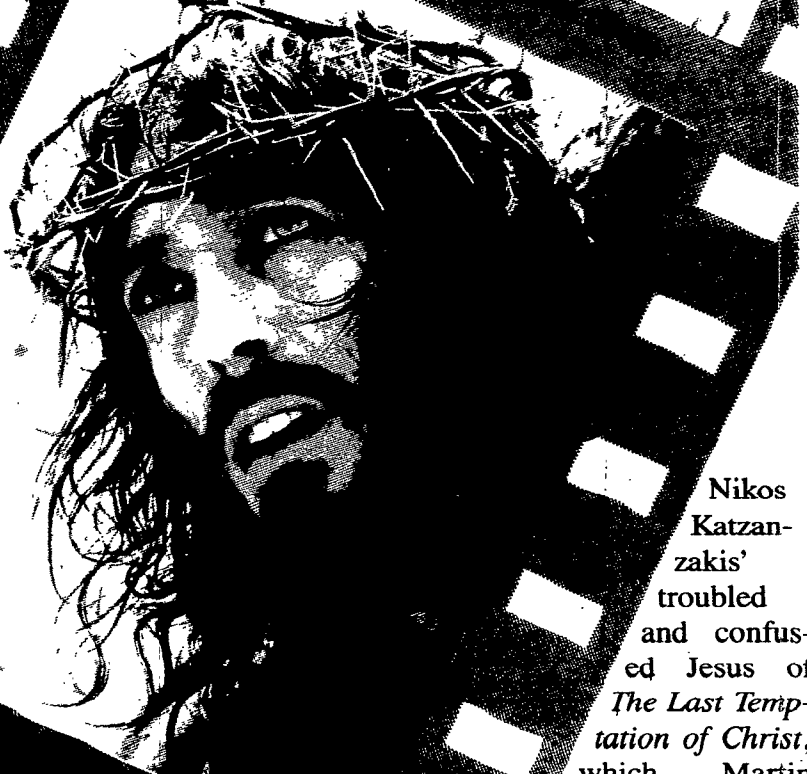
By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

The French philosopher and writer Voltaire once commented: "If God made us in his image, we have certainly returned the compliment."

Whatever the comment's theological validity, in the arts at least, portrayals of God — and especially of Jesus — have frequently revealed the artists' own visions of God, faith, the world and even themselves.

In the realm of painting, for example, one can find Picasso's depiction of Jesus as a bull fighter or red-headed Vincent van Gogh's painting of Jesus with red hair. During the latter 14th century, when the Black Death was sweeping across Europe, portrayals of Jesus shifted from emphasizing his humanity to showing him as a stern judge and ruler because of the popular belief that the plague was a punishment from God.

Literature includes many traditional, pious biographies of Christ, but also Joseph Renan's 1863 *Life of Jesus*, which shows Christ as a likable, peace-loving, good rabbi who is turned into God only by his contemporaries; D.H. Lawrence's "The Man Who Died," which tells of a Jesus who survives the crucifixion, hides from his friends and associates, and eventually flees to Egypt; and



Nikos Kazantzakis' troubled and confused Jesus of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which Martin Scorsese used as the basis for his controversial 1988 film of the same title.

And in recent years, the film world has presented viewers with images of Christ ranging from the charismatic leader portrayed in "The King of Kings" (1961), to the Marxist champion of the poor in "The Gospel According to St. Matthew" (1964) to the somewhat confused Messiah of "Jesus Christ Superstar" (1973).

"What they are all attempting to do is give Jesus a kind of human face pretty much dictated by the canons of their own times," observed Father Sebastian Falcone, president of St. Bernard's Institute. "We are all subjected to our own image of Jesus that has been shaped and colored by our culture."

John Halligan, a theology professor at St. John Fisher College who teaches a course on Jesus in film, speculated that each generation must retell the "myth of Jesus" in order to make sense of that myth in their lives.

"Unless Christians affirm the myth of Jesus in their lives, they are not Christians," he said. "By 'myth' I mean a story which gives reality meaning. The story of Jesus is the story of Jesus of Nazareth. (But) the reality of Jesus did not cease in the first century; it continues in the life of every Christian."

The argument that each generation retells the story of Jesus in its own way is not new. But recent biblical scholarship has revealed that this tendency extends back to the four Gospels themselves, Father Falcone said.

Since 1964, Father Falcone pointed out, scripture scholars have identified the four distinct approaches to Jesus used by the Evangelists. Mark focuses on the messianic Jesus. Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies — a king who is the "son of David." Luke's Jesus is a prophet who brings a message of salvation through acts of mercy and healing. In John's Gospel, Jesus is the Son of God who brings to people a sense of relationship, of intimacy with God.

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